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LANL Today story Project Y badge photos
Project Y badge photos, 1943-1944
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Recently digitized badge photos of first Lab staff now available online

By Angie Piccolo, archivist, [National Security Research Center](#)

The National Security Research Center (NSRC) recently [restored about 1,400 of its iconic badge photos](#) from the Lab's earliest days, stopping the deterioration of the photos and preserving valuable artifacts from Lab history. Now, [the badge photos can be accessed online](#) via the Lab's external website.

What is the badge photo collection?

The Project Y badge photos were taken of staff and military personnel during the Manhattan Project, the U.S. government's top-secret effort to build the first-ever atomic bombs and help end World War II.

Security badges were issued to all staff, including prominent figures such as Lab Director **J. Robert Oppenheimer**, General **Leslie Groves**, famed scientists **Emilio Segrè** and **Edward**

Teller, as well as confirmed spies **Klaus Fuchs** and **Theodore Hall**. More than 8,000 people worked at the Los Alamos Lab, though only a portion of those badge photos still exist today, likely due to deterioration, age, and simple disregard over time.



Klaus Fuchs



Theodore Hall

(https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1QGIl-l13K2TXqB7FwAR64bbN_4QCT3k)

Why are they important?

The badges provide visual documentation of the Lab's first staff and include [codes](#) that most likely correspond to the individual's department. The shape and color of someone's badge also indicated their role and level of security clearance at the Lab.

Additionally, the images "humanize the workforce by putting names to faces of the people who built atomic weapons in secret for two years, especially those who are less known," says NSRC archivist **Laura McGuinness**. "The historical narrative tends to focus on the male scientists, engineers, and physicists who traveled from all over the country and as far away as Europe, arriving in Los Alamos to work on the Manhattan Project. Yet we often overlook the important role that local New Mexicans, women, and other minorities played."

Many worked in supporting positions such as machinists, secretaries, or librarians. They don't always receive the same recognition as scientists, yet their work was also vital to the success of the Manhattan Project. "By digitizing the images," McGuinness says, "we are giving them space to be remembered."

Preserving history

Digitization is important for preservation – it allows access without the need for physical handling. The badge photos are fairly small, roughly 5 centimeters by 3.5 centimeters, and handling them puts the 80-year-old photos at risk.

This is not the first preservation effort for the collection. In 2020, the collection was sent to Santa Fe for [restoration and preservation](#).

Digitization is also important for accessibility. Not everyone has access to the NSRC collections, which are housed in a classified area of the Lab. By creating a digital copy of the image, both Lab employees and the public will have access to these images for their use.

McGuiness and NSRC archivist **Angie Piccolo** spent four months scanning and digitizing the photos. This process included creating a complete inventory of the photographs, listing the names and codes of each individual.

Some mysteries remain

There remains a mystery surrounding the codes associated with each individual image. For example, Oppenheimer's photo has the code K-6 on his white badge, while Groves's code is UA. What do these codes mean? Are they associated with a department, a security level, chronological order of employment?



J. Robert Oppenheimer



General Leslie Groves

(https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1QGIl-l13K2TXqB7FwxAR64bbN_4QCT3k)

Additionally, during the scanning process, the NSRC staff found that many staff have multiple photos, some with different codes. Did they have to update their photo when they moved departments? Below are examples of these duplicate images. Share your best theories with us at nsrc@lanl.gov.

Breakout box:

How can I access the photos?

The Project Y Badge Photos are now available on the Lab's external website in the history section. <https://about.lanl.gov/history-innovation/badges>

Staff with duplicate images:



Raymond J. Bosnjak was an Army electrical engineer assigned to Los Alamos.
(https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1QGil-l13K2TXqB7FwxAR64bbN_4QCT3k)



Inez C. O'Brien served in the Women's Army Corps at Los Alamos during the Manhattan Project and worked as a librarian for the Technical Library, according to the Atomic Heritage Foundation.

(https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1QGIl-l13K2TXqB7FwAR64bbN_4QCT3k)



Mary F. Argo was a physicist at Los Alamos during the Manhattan Project, along with her husband Harold Argo.

(https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1QGIl-l13K2TXqB7FwAR64bbN_4QCT3k)

Additional Images:



Tony Padilla was a staff worker at Los Alamos
(https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1QGIl-l13K2TXqB7FxwAR64bbN_4QCT3k)



Constance L. Simonsen

(https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1QGIl-l13K2TXqB7FwxAR64bbN_4QCT3k)



Rufina V. Ladabour- X-7

(https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1QGIl-l13K2TXqB7FwxAR64bbN_4QCT3k)